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Community Development in Contradictory Times:

Looking Beyond Asset-Based Community Development in Scotland?

Introduction

As a result of Coalition Government's austerity programme, the UK is experiencing the most significant transformation of its welfare state since its founding after the Second World War (Taylor-Gooby 2011; Clarke and Newman 2012). Key social welfare services are now being eliminated, means-tested, dramatically curtailed or privatised. As the welfare state withdraws from different aspects of public life, the Coalition government argues that individuals, families and community groups can fill this vacuum with their knowledge, assets and energy to rebuild local services on their own terms and in ways that meet their interests and needs.

The Scottish Government opposes the Coalition's austerity programme and has an official policy of mitigating its effects (Scottish Government 2013). With its limited powers over the welfare system, the Scottish Government argues that a combination of its Social Wage and the full mitigation of the Coalition's 'bedroom tax' have an important but limited role in protecting the most vulnerable. Nevertheless, the Scottish Government is also embarking on a project to reshape the relationship between the citizen and the state. The Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services, the 'Christie Commission' (2011), was tasked by the Scottish Government to explore social welfare provision in a context of austerity. Its key finding was that: 'Unless Scotland embraces a radical, new, collaborative culture throughout our public services, both budgets and provision will buckle under the strain [of demand and underfunding]'. The Commission recommended 'a fundamental overhaul of the relationships within and between those institutions and agencies - public, third sector and private - responsible for designing and delivering public services'.

Perhaps it is unsurprising that in this moment of economic, political and social upheaval in Britain and across Europe, policymakers, practitioners and activists are looking for new ways of thinking about democracy and how it is realised (or undermined) through the particular relationships between the state, the market and citizens. Asset-based approaches, which seek to reorient policy and practice from community needs, deficits and problems to a focus on community skills, strengths and power, appear to offer a way to navigate this new economic and social reality of drastic cuts to state spending, falling living standards and declines in trust between citizens and the state by removing the state as a primary actor in social welfare and instead focusing efforts to 'democratise the state' by putting communities at the heart of welfare planning and delivery.

Asset-based approaches and asset-based community development (ABCD) ask some of the right questions about the role and function of the state, citizen participation and the importance of associational life. However, these approaches have attracted criticism for the ways in which they seem to shift the responsibility for social welfare from the state to citizens (Ferguson 2010; Friedli 2013; MacLeod and Emejulu 2014). This briefing paper serves as an opportunity to consider some of the opportunities and limitations of asset-based approaches to help activists, practitioners and policymakers think critically about the nature of social problems; citizens' relationships to the

welfare state and a new vision for Scottish community development in these uncertain times.

Placing wide-ranging debates about austerity measures, welfare reform and democracy in the context of community development and asset-based approaches gives us the opportunity to think through some of the drivers that make citizenship and participation meaningful and possible. The following are three interconnected arguments to help with thinking through some of these tricky issues.

The importance of political education

Community development is a process of supporting people to come together to critically debate and take action on issues that are important to them. However, community development is not a neutral or apolitical activity. It can be deployed in a myriad of ways to advance the various agendas of the state, the market, the third sector or different kinds of citizens. Whilst there is no 'true' form of community development, the best examples of community development are those that explicitly create community development as a process of learning for democracy (Learning for Democracy Group 2008). Framing community development as a group process in which people learn about themselves and society can be a crucial way for Scottish community development to effectively contribute to democratic public life.

As the organising and mobilising around the Independence Referendum demonstrated, when real issues to do with the state and the economy are on the table for meaningful debate, and when people know that they can directly affect the outcome of these discussions through their actions, there is a galvanizing effect on democratic deliberations and grassroots action. For those who are interested in community development, there is now an opportunity to build on the grassroots Referendum work to support new ways of thinking about and engaging with the state, social welfare and citizen participation. However, we must resist the temptation to cast these debates as a kind of bloodless, low-stakes process that is hostile to genuine disagreements between different groups. For example, the community planning process was touted as this important democratic process of bringing together different service providers and citizens to reshape services. However, community engagement in these processes has been disappointing. Perhaps there is an opportunity with the forthcoming Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act to rethink how citizens engage with the state.

Expanding and defending citizenship

We are witnessing the wholesale restructuring of the welfare state and the idea of citizenship under the current austerity measures. Even in the midst of this crisis, there are real opportunities to rethink the relationship between citizens and the welfare state, and community development can help to advance these critical discussions. From the successful community buy out on the Isle of Gigha to the Glasgow Girls campaigning to stop the forcible removal of their friends seeking asylum, community development can be a

space where citizens learn how to collectively articulate, organise and advance their demands for social justice.

Community development spaces that defend and advance citizenship rights do not happen by accident. Critical community development spaces must be intentionally designed to foster debate, develop community leadership, strategise action and endure inevitable defeats. A community development process that creates this kind of space with and for citizens can help to meaningfully transform the relationship between citizens and the state.

Reaffirming grassroots work

Working at the grassroots is important. Learning how to engage with, listen to and respect the views of different kinds of people are not only essential skills for those interested in community development but are a demonstration of how to apply the values of democracy, citizenship and social justice to practice. Grassroots work helps to link communities to the state and can be a key mechanism for trying to democratise the state—especially for the most marginalised groups. This process of helping communities come together to influence the state and make it work better for them can be considered the most important contribution of community development to democracy in Scotland.

The ability to articulate needs, demands and problems, to learn how undertake deliberative dialogue and how to use collective power fosters the sort of environment in which individuals can experience themselves, sometimes for the first time, as being active agents exerting control over their lives. However, grassroots work is increasingly under threat. Many community development practitioners no longer work face to face with individuals and groups but manage an array of sessional staff working on part-time, low-paid and insecure contracts. Certainly, ‘doing democracy’ does not have to be well-paid job (or funded by the state) but the ability to think expansively about community development and its ability to foster democracy in Scotland is hampered by the way in which it is currently organised and funded. Too often, grassroots community development work is short-term, piecemeal and underfunded which severely limits the ability for practitioners and activists to enact a broader vision for community development.

Conclusions

This briefing is an attempt to kick-start a debate about what community development might mean during this moment of economic crisis and austerity. The policy trend of asset-based approaches and asset-based community development offers one path through this uncertain moment. Asset-based approaches do raise important questions about the relationship between citizens and the state—but there are other ways of thinking about both the problem and a range of solutions. To conclude, this briefing offers the following questions for activists, practitioners and policymakers to consider:

- How might we think differently and expansively about community development and its relationship to politics, grassroots work and citizenship?
- What role might community development play in fostering critical debates about democracy, citizenship and social justice?
- How might the state be reformed to make it work better for the most marginalised groups?
- How might community development capitalise on the energy and hard work of the Referendum campaign?

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